

VU Research Portal

The Mystical Quest as a Path to Peacebuilding

Listijabudi, D.K.

2016

document version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

citation for published version (APA)

Listijabudi, D. K. (2016). *The Mystical Quest as a Path to Peacebuilding: A Cross-textual Reading of the Stories of Dewa Ruci and Jacob at the Jabbok as a Contribution to Asian Multi-faith Hermeneutics*. [PhD-Thesis – Research external, graduation internal, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam].

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

E-mail address:

vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl

SUMMARY

This dissertation underlines the importance of reflecting (and then developing) practices of cross-textual reading of sacred texts in situations in which a variety of socio-religious hybridities is present. To demonstrate how this can be done, this dissertation presents a reading of two texts, one from the cultural and religious tradition of Java referred to as *Kejawen* that was formed through layers of indigenous, Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic influence and one from the Hebrew scripture as read by and for the Christian minority in Indonesia. The aim is not to biblical hermeneutics for its own sake but to create mutual interactions that lead to more understanding, openness, and peace within the hybrid socio-cultural-religious realities of Asian religious life. The purpose of cross-textual reading (as promoted by Asian theologians, especially Archie Lee) is to juxtapose two different religious texts and read each text in the light of the other in order to find mutual interactions, while honouring the differences, and discovering enrichments found in the interaction of the two texts as each illuminates the other.

It is certain that maintaining a proper biblical hermeneutics amidst hybrid socio-cultural-religious contexts like in Asia in general and Indonesia in particular can start from constructive encounters between sacred texts in order to strengthen the peacemaking potential for individuals and society as a whole. Doing so is an important calling as well as an existential challenge for biblical scholars. In contexts where varieties of social, cultural, and religious life are present together, religious plurality is expressed in the richness of religious insights. Such contexts may generate tension between religious and cultural groups on one hand, but, on the other, also make possible creative and mutual interactions. What is needed to respond to such complex situations requires an open, creative, as well as perceptive attitude in order to maintain a living existential dialogue among the groups who have a shared agency and who also must live their differences with dignity so that there can be peace. As in other parts of Asia, the life of the people of Indonesia has been, is, and will continue to be nurtured and shaped by the world's formal religions as well as local and indigenous religious traditions and their sacred texts and stories. In this context, it is important to appreciate the value of a critical but positive hermeneutical attitude towards what is often called syncretism as the dynamics of fragile identities in the encounter of religious traditions.

The main objective of this study is to investigate how, as a method of reading texts in the context of social and cultural hybridity, Asian contextual hermeneutics through cross-textual readings may contribute to peace and reconciliation processes by promoting awareness of the mystical-spiritual quest through which individual transformation can take place. Through the inward journey, struggle and enmity become understanding, acceptance and openness to the other. Peacebuilding cannot be accomplished without the transformation of persons, including readers and believers, and hermeneutical standpoints, including perceptions of the sacred text of the other. In contexts of lived, socio-cultural- and religious hybridity, where people have read, listened to and/or are influenced by more than just one text, it is important to examine the differences between sacred texts in order to have beneficial insights that can lead to religious enrichments and more peaceful lives together.

This dissertation makes use of the method used in the field of multi-faith hermeneutics and want to investigate possibilities for peacebuilding that emerge from a cross-textual reading of two religious texts: "Dewa Ruci," one of the prominent Javanese mystical texts often performed as *wayang* or shadow puppet theatre, and "Jacob at the Jabbok," an episode in the Old Testament/ Hebrew Bible. These texts were chosen because they are important in the respective contexts in which they function and because that they carry shared

motifs and a parallel narrative structure of which one very important element is what I will call the mystical quest.

In my reading, the “Dewa Ruci” story of the hero Wrekudara’s search for the “Living Water” teaches its readers how to undergo a mystical quest by wrestling intensively with challenges, difficulties, and mistakes, on one hand, and with guidance, comfort, and grace, on the other. This is done in a way that enables the seeker to experience the most significant discovery in life: purification of the self and union with the Divine. The Living Water (or *Tirta Pawitra*) the hero eventually finds in mystic union with the divine is not an ordinary water but an existential experience and, at the same time, a thorough understanding that transform the seeker to be a new person after the long journey. Wrekudara is transformed from an ordinary and rough person into one who has been enlightened and purified in his *unio mystica* with the god Dewa Ruci. The impact of the presence of this enlightened person should influence society positively, but keep the mystical experience within his/her own heart and not show it off. This story is a Javanese story, composed by Javanese *pujangga* for a specific aim, and cannot be found in the corpus of the original Indian *Mahabharata* text. Therefore, I argue that there is a significant peacebuilding message contained in this story about a human who is invited to kill his own evil passions and, hence, purify himself in union with the Almighty. Finally, although the story of *Mahabharata* also tells of how brotherly tension between the Pandawa and the Kurawa leads them to the battle, I argue that the story of “Dewa Ruci” can be interpreted as a story that does not necessarily lead to conflict.

The story of “Jacob at the Jabbok” found in Genesis 32: 22-32 depicts a transformational journey from conflict to encounter and reconciliation. Jacob is transformed in order to face the other –his twin brother Esau, whom he has deprived of his birthright and who seeks revenge against him-- in openness, humility, and courage through the experience of wrestling and questioning in a profound, direct, intimate, and existentially transformative encounter with the *ish*, a mysterious and presumably divine stranger. In my reading, the story shows that the mystical quest is never egocentric, never solely between one person and God. It is not about the unmediated *unio mystica* of human and God, but rather as shown by the presence of an *ish* in between, God is experienced through the other. Indeed, God is to be found nowhere else than in the other. On one hand, it can be argued that the encounter with the Divine can function as a meaningful element that must precede the encounter with other persons with whom there is tension. On the other hand, the effort to find a way to make peace and address the other, the human enemy, with an open and mindful heart can also lead to feeling the Divine Presence.

When the two texts interact, we find similarities and differences. These findings are counted as important discoveries. This is when one text offers its perspective to its partner-text. If we analyze the found differences between the two stories mentioned, we may find several levels when we compare and interrelate them. There are elements in which the differences are obvious but do not lead to any confrontation of ideas. Regarding the mystical experiences, these obvious differences stem from different mystical languages and also create mutual resonances, both dialogically and dialectically. I suppose that the adequate attitude regarding this kind of difference is honouring the dignity of their specific categories in the mystical worldview. There are also what I call enriching differences which may be sensed through interconnected perspectives that look for the mutual interaction between the two stories via the efforts of the reader, which can be taken as tools for a dialogical and critical reading. At the same time, an attentive and careful reading calls for a certain practical response to the question of how the mystical encounter with a divine other requires a new relationship with the human other, in the context of the enmity that serves as the background of each story.

As a conclusion, we find that the two stories underline such important concepts as: (a) the significance of perseverance which leads to the growth; (b) the presence of solitude empowers the blossoming of maturity, courage, and vulnerability which then leads to a peaceful yet authoritative (in the sense of having a solid sense of self-assurance) reality; (c) the presence of mild but strong attitude towards oneself and others; and (d) the quality of being present in and not withdrawing from the community. These findings are necessary to foster peaceful and constructive interactions with others. Therefore, I argue that the work of peacebuilding is always contingent on continuing mutual interactions among three elements of: right concepts, teachings, and wisdom (*orthodoxy*); right manner and action (*orthopraxy*); and right inner or spiritual life as the source of everything (*orthopneumaty*). These are the three frames we need to take into account and hold together when we connect the work of peace with mysticism, as suggested by the two mystical stories. It is also found that the ideas of discipleship and peace in both stories resonate with certain basic values of the Anabaptist-Mennonite community of faith, to which the author belongs.

Finally, this dissertation offers the promise of future encounters through communitarian readings of sacred texts from Asian cultural and religious contexts and the Bible in which these world-shaping texts may be read and reread together by both groups bound by tradition and culture (in the case of this dissertation, adherents of *Kejawen* beliefs, some of whom may also be Christians) and Christians in the hybrid contexts of Java and of Asia more generally. In this kind of cross- scriptural/sacred texts dialogue, the reading partners can offer their readings of both texts to one another in order to find new insights that may deepen and enrich their understandings of their own text as well as of the text of the other without ignoring the significance of each text for its own the community.